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SUBJECT: IRANIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY: NO SIGN YET OF A
POST-ELECTION ASYLUM-SEEKER SURGE

REF: (A) 2008 ISTANBUL 416 (B) ISTANBUL 55 (C) 7/9/09
BAKU IRAN WATCHER EMAIL (D) ASHGABAT 872

Classified By: Consul General Sharon Wiener; reason 1.5 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In recent meetings with UNHCR and ICMC representatives in Turkey we learned that neither organization has seen a significant surge, yet, of Iranians coming to Turkey to request asylum or refugee status as a result of the post-election crackdown in Iran. However, UNHCR officials underscored that given the several-month delay between its initial registration of asylum-seekers and UNHCR's detailed follow-up interview to help determine refugee status, they hope to have a more detailed picture by late August of how many Iranian asylum seekers fled Iran because of post-election political repression or risk of persecution. Both UNHCR and ICMC are prepared to deal with a short-term surge of Iranian asylum-seekers, but a lack of Farsi interpreters in both organizations precludes them from handling a sustained flood of Iranian refugees. UNHCR's and ICMC's current caseloads, with 4070 Iranians currently registered with UNHCR Turkey, are primarily cases based on fear of persecution for religious reasons (Bahai and Christian converts), sexual orientation, and ethnicity. We will continue to monitor the situation and will re-engage with UNHCR and ICMC in late August/early September, after UNHCR has had an opportunity to conduct more detailed interviews with recent Iranian asylum-seekers. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Following up on ref B and C accounts of whether regional UNHCR offices are seeing a post-election surge of Iranian asylum-seekers, we met July 22 in Istanbul with representatives from the International Catholic Migration Commission (the USG's overseas processing entity for refugees in Turkey to be resettled in the U.S.), and on July 24 with UNHCR representatives in Ankara.

UNHCR: Too soon to assess a post-election refugee uptick

¶3. (SBU) UNHCR representatives Annika Sundland, Brenda Goddard, and Akif Atli told ConGen Istanbul's Iran Watcher and Embassy Ankara poloff that UNHCR shares the USG's concern about the possibility of a surge in Iranian asylum seekers coming to Turkey if the post-election crackdown on demonstrators continues. UNHCR Ankara has a contingency plan to divert limited spare resources to processing Iranian cases, although its greatest limitation is in Farsi interpreters; Sundland acknowledged UNHCR does not have enough Farsi interpreters to handle a significant sustained increase in Iranian refugee applications. Given what appears to be a forced calm currently prevailing in Iran, however, UNHCR does not expect a massive influx of Iranian political asylum seekers in the near term. UNHCR representatives told us that there are early indications, based on initial registration interviews, of an increased number of political asylum seekers, but UNHCR believes it is too soon to tell how

significant a trend it is.

¶4. (SBU) When an Iranian asylum-seeker in Turkey first contacts UNHCR to register, UNHCR takes down initial case information but only conducts a full "refugee status determination" (RSD) interview three to five months later. UNHCR officials said they are seeing more cases, at the initial registration stage, of Iranians claiming that their participation in post-election protests puts them at grave risk of persecution by Iranian authorities, especially if they believe their faces were filmed or their names are known to the regime. UNHCR expects to have a more detailed picture of numbers of such cases when the asylum seekers return to UNHCR for RSD interviews in the next few months. Whether UNHCR grants refugee status to such applicants will depend in part on how the Iranian legal system proceeds with handling of peaceful protesters who have been detained and/or charged with crimes, a question UNHCR is examining closely.

¶5. (SBU) A snapshot of UNHCR Turkey's current Iranian caseload: According to UNHCR's figures as of July 10, 2009, the majority of Iranian asylum-seekers in Turkey continue to be based on religion (Bahai and Christian converts), based on persecuted sexual orientation, and based on ethnic persecution (Kurds). A minority of cases in Turkey are based on fear of political persecution. There are currently 4070 Iranians registered with UNHCR in Turkey, making up about 23 percent of UNHCR Turkey's total caseload (UNHCR is also handling some 8,000 Iraqi and 3,200 Afghan cases). By ethnic breakdown, Iranian cases include some 1900 Persians, 1400 Kurds, 420 Azeris, 50 Ahwaz Arabs, and smaller numbers of Assyrian-Iranians, Lor, Baluch, and Gilani. By religious

ISTANBUL 00000287 002 OF 003

breakdown, Iranian cases include almost 2000 Muslims, 1160 Bahai, 480 Christians, 360 "no religion", and 130 "other".

¶6. (SBU) Of the 4070, around 500 are currently awaiting onward resettlement to the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Sweden. Goddard noted that those refugees selected for resettlement to Canada or Australia unfortunately must wait until 2010, as Canada's and Australia's annual quotas for refugees from Turkey (400 for each country) have already been reached this year. Sundland said UNHCR is grateful to the USG for accepting by far the largest number of refugees, and for providing the bulk of UNHCR's funding. (UNHCR Turkey has a staff of 66 and a 2009 operating budget of USD 7.85 million.) Sundland, however, offered a gentle plea, both to the USG and to other accepting countries, to raise the numbers of refugees they are willing to accept annually.

¶7. (SBU) Goddard and Sundland underscored the challenges facing Iranian asylum-seekers who come to Turkey. Because Turkey does not formally recognize non-European refugees, Iranians who have been accepted by the UNHCR as refugees may only stay in Turkey until UNHCR can resettle them elsewhere. Turkey does not always separate out asylum seekers entering illegally from migrants entering illegally, and often denies UNHCR access to them before deporting them (Turkey considers asylum requests coming from detained Iranians to have been made "in bad faith"). Turkey usually rejects refugee applications from Iranians who entered Turkey via a third country (e.g., Iraq), arguing they should have sought protection there first. Turkey also looks less favorably on Iranian asylum requests made by Iranians in Istanbul or western Turkey, as the GOT believes they should have registered immediately on entering Turkey. For those Iranians who present themselves to register with UNHCR, the registration and status determination process is long and cumbersome, as described in Ref A. Once registered, Iranian asylum-seekers are assigned by the GOT to live in a "satellite city", usually in eastern or central Turkey, far from Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir. (Currently, 833 Iranians live in Kayseri; 789 Iranians are in Van; 614 Iranians are in Nevsehir; 280 Iranians are in Nigde; 274 Iranians are in Afyon, etc.)

¶8. (SBU) After registration and an RSD interview, asylum-seekers usually wait up to one year for a decision on their status. Those who qualify for refugee status usually wait another one to three years for onward resettlement. During this time, conditions are difficult. Receiving permission from the GOT to work legally almost impossible (UNHCR has a record of only one refugee successfully obtaining a work permit). Housing is not provided. Only very limited social services are provided. Moreover, all asylum-seekers and refugees must pay the Interior Ministry a biannual residency fee of several hundred dollars each for every family member (including children). Turkey will not grant an exit permit for eventual departure without proof of payment. As Sundland noted, these conditions serve as a disincentive, whether intentionally or not, to Iranians considering coming to Turkey to seek asylum.

ICMC: "We could cope with a short surge"

¶9. (SBU) ICMC representatives Linda Samarzdic, Meliha Hasanbegovic, and Damir Thaqi told ConGen Istanbul's Iran Watcher and ConGen Istanbul conoff that because ICMC's role is to help resettle Iranian refugees that the UNHCR has designated for resettlement to the US, ICMC faces a longer "time lag" than UNHCR in its ability to gauge a possible recent uptick in Iranian political asylum cases. Tracking what we heard from UNHCR, ICMC's current Iranian caseload is made up primarily of Bahais, Christian converts, and the Iranian lesbian/gay/bisexual/transsexual (LGBT) community. ICMC cannot assess yet whether a surge of Iranian political asylum seekers fleeing post-election persecution will add to its caseload, but in the event it did, "we could cope with a surge for a short period of time." Like UNHCR, ICMC's greatest need, in the event of a surge in Iranian cases, would be for Farsi interpreters.

¶10. (SBU) Samarzdic told us there is currently a group of 15 Iranian political asylum-seekers (comment: according to UNHCR documentation, most of them are "ex-PMOI" members, aka MEK members) who the Interior Ministry has detained at a separate detention facility in Kirklareli. Turkey will not allow UNHCR or ICMC to interview them. The Interior Ministry was poised to deport them, but in almost all of their cases the European Court of Human Rights issued a stay of deportation in 2008, so they remain in detention. Many have been

ISTANBUL 00000287 003 OF 003

rejected by third countries onward resettlement, while others still await the possibility of onward resettlement.

¶11. (SBU) Samarzdic told us ICMC processed 862 Iranians for onward resettlement to the U.S. from Turkey during the first half of 2009, of whom 749 have moved to the U.S. The next tranche of Iranian refugees for onward U.S. resettlement, about 400, will be interviewed by visiting DHS/CIS officials next month.

¶12. (SBU) ICMC has noticed a relative decline in the numbers of Iranian Bahai being processed for US resettlement in 2009. Samarzdic asked whether the USG was aware of any decision by the Bahai leadership either in Iran or in Europe to limit the numbers of Bahai community members leaving Iran this year for onward resettlement, perhaps as a result of the May 2008 detention and potential death-penalty charges against seven Iranian Bahai community leaders. We told ICMC that we were unaware of any decision by Bahai community leaders to limit the number of Bahai asylum seekers leaving Iran.

Comment

¶13. (C) Consistent with Ref B and C assessments, our discussions with UNHCR and ICMC indicate that neither organization has seen a significant surge, yet, of Iranians

escaping to Turkey to request asylum or refugee status as a result of the post-election crackdown in Iran. Anecdotally, ConGen Istanbul has seen what appears to be a rise, based on the numbers of calls or emails from, and walk-in encounters at post with, Iranians claiming to have been beaten or persecuted as a result of their participation on post-election peaceful demonstrations (septel). We thus will continue to monitor the situation, and will re-engage with UNHCR and ICMC on this issue in late August/early September, after UNHCR has had an opportunity to conduct more detailed interviews with recent Iranian asylum-seekers. End comment.

WIENER